



Anwar is not the answer by Lena Kay

The release of Mr. Anwar Ibrahim from prison and the reversal of his conviction on sodomy charges have been heralded as a landmark in Malaysian politics. Some now look to the former deputy prime minister to lead the Malaysian reform movement. Anwar's release has been rightfully applauded, but its impact on Malaysian politics should not be overstated; Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is the chief beneficiary of this surprising turn of events. The move is good for U.S. relations with Malaysia, however: freeing Anwar eliminates a major irritant and will allow the two countries to forge closer ties in the future.

At the time of his imprisonment six years ago, Anwar was heir apparent to then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad. Differences between the two men over the correct response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis resulted in the deputy PM's dismissal. Rather than going quietly, Anwar took his fight to the streets, rallying the public around the call for *reformasi* (reform). He was subsequently arrested, tried, and convicted of sodomy and abuse of power amid the biggest demonstrations in decades.

Prison did not remove Anwar from public view. A very visible black eye given to him in jail by then Inspector General of Police A. Rahim Noor, arsenic poisoning, back injuries, and the establishment of an opposition party, *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (PKN), by his wife, Wan Azizah, ensured that Anwar would remain a focus of international attention. His imprisonment has been a continuing issue for U.S. relations with Malaysia; relations between the two countries were most strained in 1998 when then Vice President Al Gore gave a speech endorsing *reformasi* in Kuala Lumpur on the eve of the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum summit.

Earlier this month, in a surprise move, the Malaysian Supreme Court reversed Anwar's conviction on charges of sodomy, ruling that the testimony of the main witness against him was unreliable. Having served his sentence on the corruption charge, Anwar was then released from prison.

Some now look to the newly freed Anwar to spearhead the reform movement in Malaysia. That is unlikely. As a practical matter, Anwar is banned from politics for five years as a result of his conviction on corruption charges, which Malaysian courts have pointedly refused to overturn. Equally important is the fact that his appeal has diminished since he was imprisoned. He lost the status of heir apparent, and his supporters among the faithful now back Badawi. Anwar has been tainted by charges that he too profited from corruption during Mahathir's rule. Some close allies have even described him as an "opportunist." With Mahathir gone from the scene, he has lost his chief nemesis.

If anything, Anwar's release has strengthened the hand of Prime Minister Badawi. The reversal of what has been roundly condemned as a miscarriage of justice makes the prime

minister look stronger. He has been praised for promoting judicial independence, even though he has denied having any influence on the decision.

Badawi is moving from strength to strength. During the first post-Mahathir general elections held earlier this year in March, the ruling *Barisan Nasional* won a landslide victory. *Keadilan* was decimated, losing all its parliamentary seats except for that of party president Wan Azizah. The result was seen as an overwhelming vote of approval for the new prime minister.

The election results in large part reflected Badawi's attempts to distinguish himself from his predecessor. In particular, he has taken aim at the crony capitalism that seemed to flourish in the Mahathir era. He arrested Tan Sri Eric Chia, a close friend of the former prime minister. He has "indefinitely postponed" several large projects that were thought to benefit other close associates of the former PM. Badawi has taken the police to task for the spate of snatch thefts, showing sensitivity to the concerns of ordinary citizens. He has chided the civil service for its inefficiency. And recent measures concerning the tax system outlined Sept. 10 will introduce more efficiency and transparency in Malaysia. All reflect a willingness to demand accountability. In so doing, Badawi has managed to coopt the reform movement, effectively depriving Anwar of his base.

A strong and popular Badawi administration is in the U.S. interest. The prime minister espouses a moderate form of Islam that can serve as a counter to the extremism that, while still a minority position, is still heard with worrying frequency in Southeast Asia. Popularity at home allows him to take pro-U.S. positions without having to watch his back. During his July visit to the White House, Badawi described Malaysia's relationship with the U.S. as "very, very, very strong" and said "that more can be done." He went on to say that "Malaysia is ready to send a medical team, a sizable medical team to Iraq."

Malaysia can play a vital significant role in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Hailed as an economic success without having to depend on oil, Malaysia is often held up as an example of what a modern democratic Islamic country can achieve. As the current chair of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Malaysia can also play a critical role in rallying international support for the war on terror.

Of course, the two countries will not see eye to eye on all issues. But the Badawi administration can work with the U.S. on key issues that affect both countries. The release of Anwar Ibrahim eliminates a thorn in the bilateral relationship. Both governments should now make the most of this opportunity.

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